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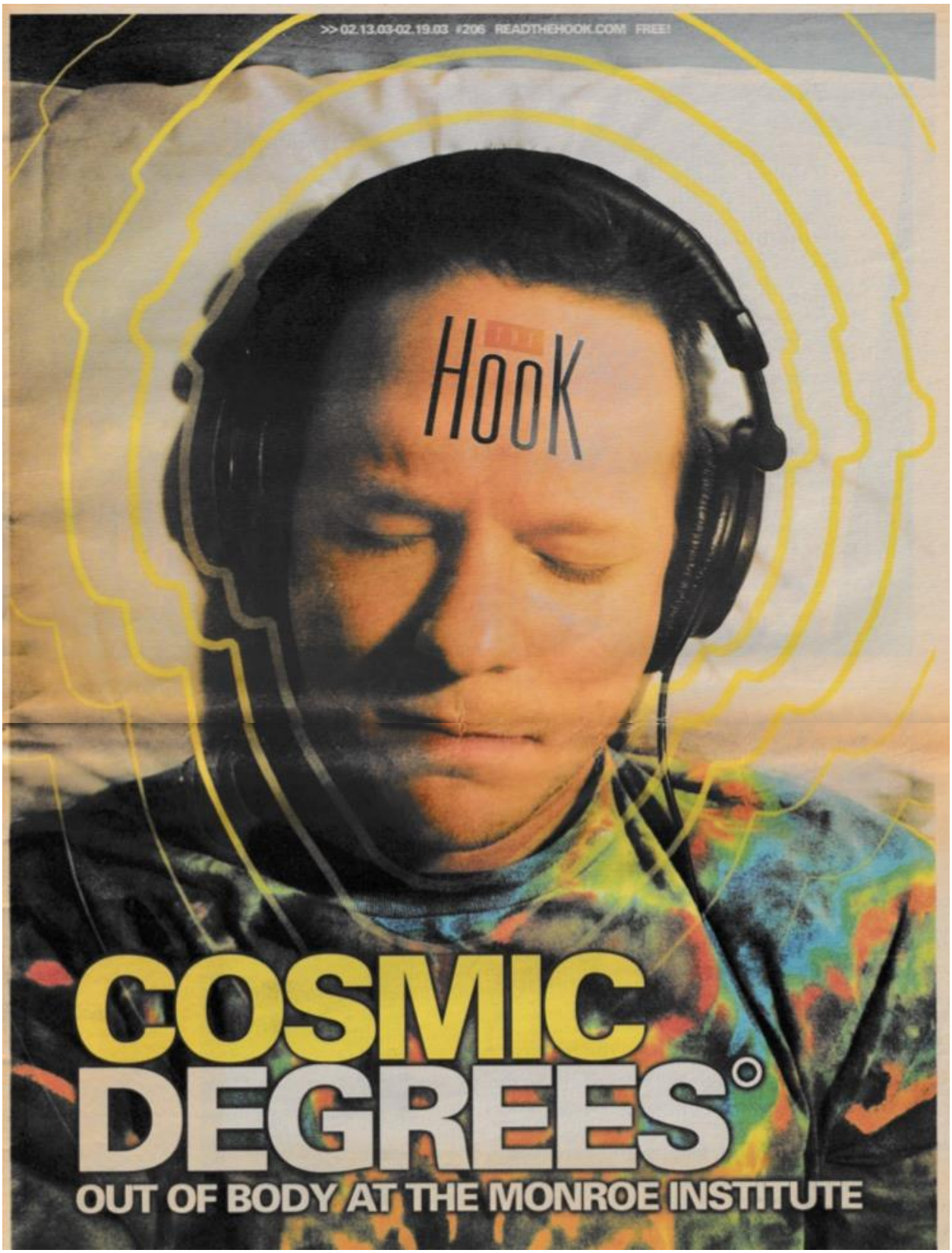

COSMIC DEGREES°

OUT OF BODY AT THE MONROE INSTITUTE

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STORY **AND** PHOTOS BY **STEPHEN BARLING** BARLING@MINDSPRING.COM

I COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE THAN 12 YEARS OLD. SITTING ON MY BED WITH UNCOMMON DETERMINATION, MY GAZE FIXED ON THE AERIAL ANTENNA JUTTING CRUDELY FROM MY PRE-REMOTE-CONTROL TV, I ATTEMPTED TO MASTER THE ART OF TELEKINESIS...

CONCENTRATE. Concentrate.

Even at that unripe age, I had a thesis: Belief tends the gate between the factual and the fantastic. If one could master one's own belief system, reality would shift to accommodate the new mode. So simple, really. The difficulty lay in my awareness of the effect of admitting even the tiniest fragment of doubt. One must do more than believe; one must *know*.

Did I just see an antenna move?

At approximately the same time, in Faber, Virginia (about 30 miles south of Charlottesville), a project began that may have aided me in understanding my prepubescent concentrations. Robert Allan Monroe, noted radio and television producer, was fulfilling a dream: the creation of an institute for the research and development of what are commonly referred to as paranormal phenomena.

"What? Who?" you ask. Why, Bob Monroe, the grand poobah of astral projection in the West, whose first book, *Journeys Out of the Body*, is the chief tome on the subject.

Regardless of your feeling on that touchy matter, as a Virginian, you have reason to thank Monroe Industries Inc. for their contribution to the Commonwealth's communications infrastructure. In 1963, having already been successful at radio and television production— and then radio station ownership— Monroe formed the Jefferson Cable Corporation, central Virginia's first cable television company. Jefferson Cable was responsible for wiring Charlottesville and Waynesboro for HBO and MTV.

By this time, Monroe (or "Bob" as he was affectionately regarded in Faber) had already stumbled upon what would become a life-long fascination. An experiment in sleep-state learning (You remember that stuff: Play a tape in French while you sleep, wake up fluent and fashionable) seemed to trigger in Bob an out-of-body experience. He found that frequently as he was falling asleep, a strong vibration overcame him, and he could leave his body, traveling wherever he willed.

At first this experience greatly troubled him. He feared he might be suffering the effects of a brain tumor, but his doctor assured him otherwise. In time he mastered his fears and began keeping notes on these strange occurrences. The notes became *Journeys Out of the Body*.

Monroe set up a studio behind his house, where he would learn to induce these states in others. The term "out of body experience" was coined by his research team.

Over the years, Monroe worked with mediums, clairvoyants, savants, psychics, and remote viewers, and kept an extensive tape record of these sessions. Many are posted at the Monroe Institute website, www.monroeinstitute.org.

Monroe developed his own technology to induce these states and soon found it had some interesting applications, includ-

The Nancy Penn Center is the residential facility.

ing relaxation, concentration, altering moods, and healing. The process— called "Hemi-Sync"— uses stereo sound to influence brain-wave patterns. The results can be measured with an electroencephalogram (EEG).

Hemi-Sync involves detuning one side of a stereo image presented to a subject through headphones. The mismatch causes the brain to hear a pitch exactly in the middle of the two original pitches, and the difference in frequency between the two sides creates "binaural beats" in the ears of the listener. (Anyone who has ever tuned a string instrument would be familiar with binaural beats— it's the illusion of vibrato that occurs when two notes of nearly identical pitch are played next to each other.)

Depending on the rate of these beats, the brain can be coaxed into altered states while the individual remains awake and conscious. Some have claimed this process puts them into direct contact with spiritual "entities" or helps them to leave their bodies.

In the mid-1970s Monroe began taking his show on the road, stopping in towns to wire volunteers to his binaural beat-generating devices. Eventually, he realized that a permanent facility was needed, and in 1978, he founded the Monroe Institute.

The Institute stretches up a gorgeous rural hillside in Faber, culminating in an unassuming collection of chalet-type buildings gathered on two sites. The first site consists of the Nancy Penn Center, a full-service residential facility with accommodations for 24 visitors and staff.

Each room at the Center contains two enclosed bunks or CHEC units (Controlled Holistic Environmental Chambers), which are really just beds built into large boxes with black curtains to seal out light. Inside each are wall-mounted speakers, a station with headphones, and a variety of lights controllable by the user.

Next door to the Nancy Penn Center is a large lecture hall and office structure, and next to that is the lab, complete with an insulated copper-lined isolation booth (with water bed), where the deepest explorations are conducted, and where the recordings that are eventually released on the Institute's "Metamusic" record label are created.

At the top of a nearby mountain is the Roberts Mountain Retreat, a similar but smaller facility used for many of the Institute's "graduate" programs. This compound includes what was once Bob Monroe's own house.

Among the notable features of the locations are two of the world's largest rose quartz crystals, imported from Brazil by a former resident. Both are over six feet tall and stand like sentinels, their bases mounted in massive slabs of concrete. A labyrinth twists on the ground near one of them. When I walked it, the labyrinth was exactly 300 paces to the center. Interesting. There are plenty of woods for hiking and a lake to swim in or paddle on.

But what really goes on at the Monroe Institute? Well, the only way to find out is to go through one of their programs, and so, at the Institute's invitation, I enrolled

as their guest in the Gateway Voyage, their $1500 entry-level program.

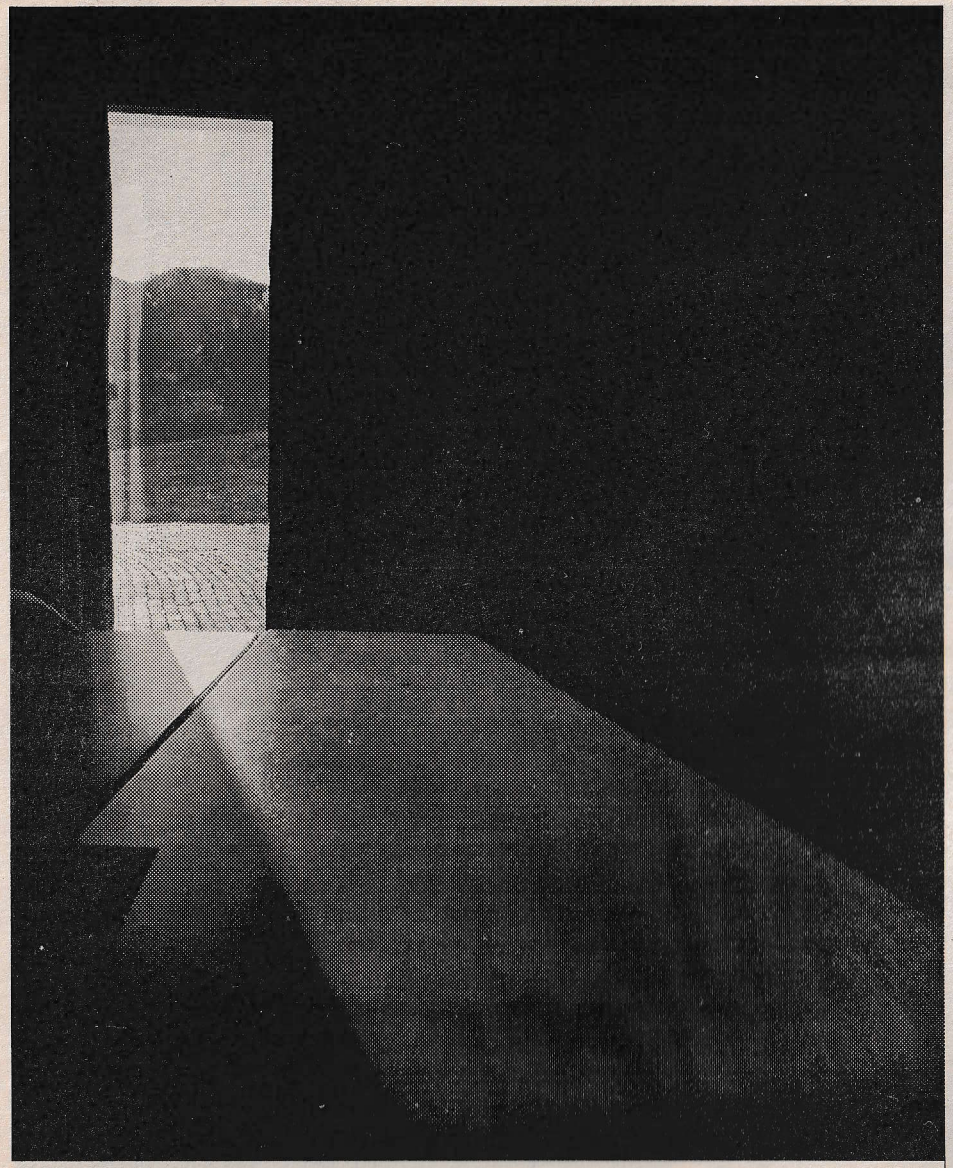
Now might be a good time for a few more words about me. Despite my childhood resolution about the power of knowledge (as relates to belief), I am something of a skeptic. I have a bachelor's degree in Eastern religions, and have spent a little time in India. I've experienced a few things that I consider somewhat miraculous (mostly at Grateful Dead concerts... on LSD), but for the most part, New Age mumbo jumbo bores me. I believe that love should rule, and there's more to reality than meets the senses, but I really don't buy the hype from people who talk about unicorns and gnome energy.

Add to this my adult conviction that ideas of the self, a soul, and life-after-death are pie-in-the-sky wishful-thinking, and I make a pretty committed naysayer. On the other hand, I've never disproved my childhood hypothesis about belief, so I remain vulnerable to the raw fact that since I certainly don't know everything, I may one day have to reassess what I think I believe, if presented with the right kind of data.

So here I go. I'm excited. I have no idea what's about to happen to me, but friends who have been through the program tell me I'll love it. Everyone else assumes I'm joining a cult.

Arriving at the Institute on a Saturday, I'm left to mingle with the program's other

Bob Monroe, who died in 1995, still speaks to his guests.



A week at the Institute costs $1,500.

participants while we wait for dinner. The group is mostly Caucasian (with the exception of one Asian woman), aged 30-55ish. They represent all walks of life: construction worker, chiropractor, postal employee, grocery chain manager, law firm publicist, artist, software developer, faith healer, psychiatrist, yoga teacher, herbalist, housewife, and curiosity seeker. Half are men, half are women. There's a married couple, as well as two people who have come to level the playing field with their Monroe veteran spouses. They're from all over the country, and two are European.

At dinner I meet Jack (not his real name, and you'll see why), who is to be my roommate, and the first in a string of curious coincidences takes place. After a main course of fried chicken and potatoes, and (I suppose) in anticipation of the cherry pie awaiting me for dessert, I utter a goofy "pie? pie? pie?," looking around the table.

Jack's gaze fixes on mine. "Pi," he says.

Cathartically, he bares his soul to these newfound friends, revealing some trouble he had with that famous irrational number back in 1999.

Fascinated with alchemical and mystical formulae and obsessing over the implications of pi, a number which appears everywhere in nature, Jack had stepped off the deep end. He couldn't shut up. His wife grew scared and called the police. When the police discovered that Jack was a licensed federal gun dealer, they called out the SWAT teams.

Jack found himself naked in the street, demanding to speak to a mathematician, as flak-jacketed teams ransacked his house. He says he wasn't violent or wielding a gun, but he spent the next three weeks in a rubber room and the ensuing years in therapy. He is no longer allowed to possess a firearm.

Now, of course, Jack's back and seems no worse for wear. A real nice guy— very intelligent, if a little intense. He's over therapy and not on drugs. All seems well.

At a group session that night, we are introduced to our trainers, both Monroe veterans. John Kortum and Penny Holmes are whimsical, intelligent, and sober— all at once. Penny is Bob Monroe's stepdaughter, and the building we are living and studying in, the Nancy Penn Center, is named for her mother.

At the end of the meeting, I only reluctantly comply when our watches are confiscated. We live on *their* time now, and future events are indicated by the distance between a held up finger and thumb.

We do our first tape session that night. Lying in my CHEC unit, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars fixed to its ceiling, I explore the guided relaxation/visualization exercise. At the tape's culmination, I swear I see swirling lights, like phantoms, circling over me. After the tape, I notice my body temperature has dropped considerably.

Other people are experiencing a great deal more. The next morning, Jack reveals to the group an ominous dream, like the television show *Survivor*, only with the Monroe Institute as the setting. Early in

his dream, he's worried about being voted out, but in the end, yours truly gets cut.

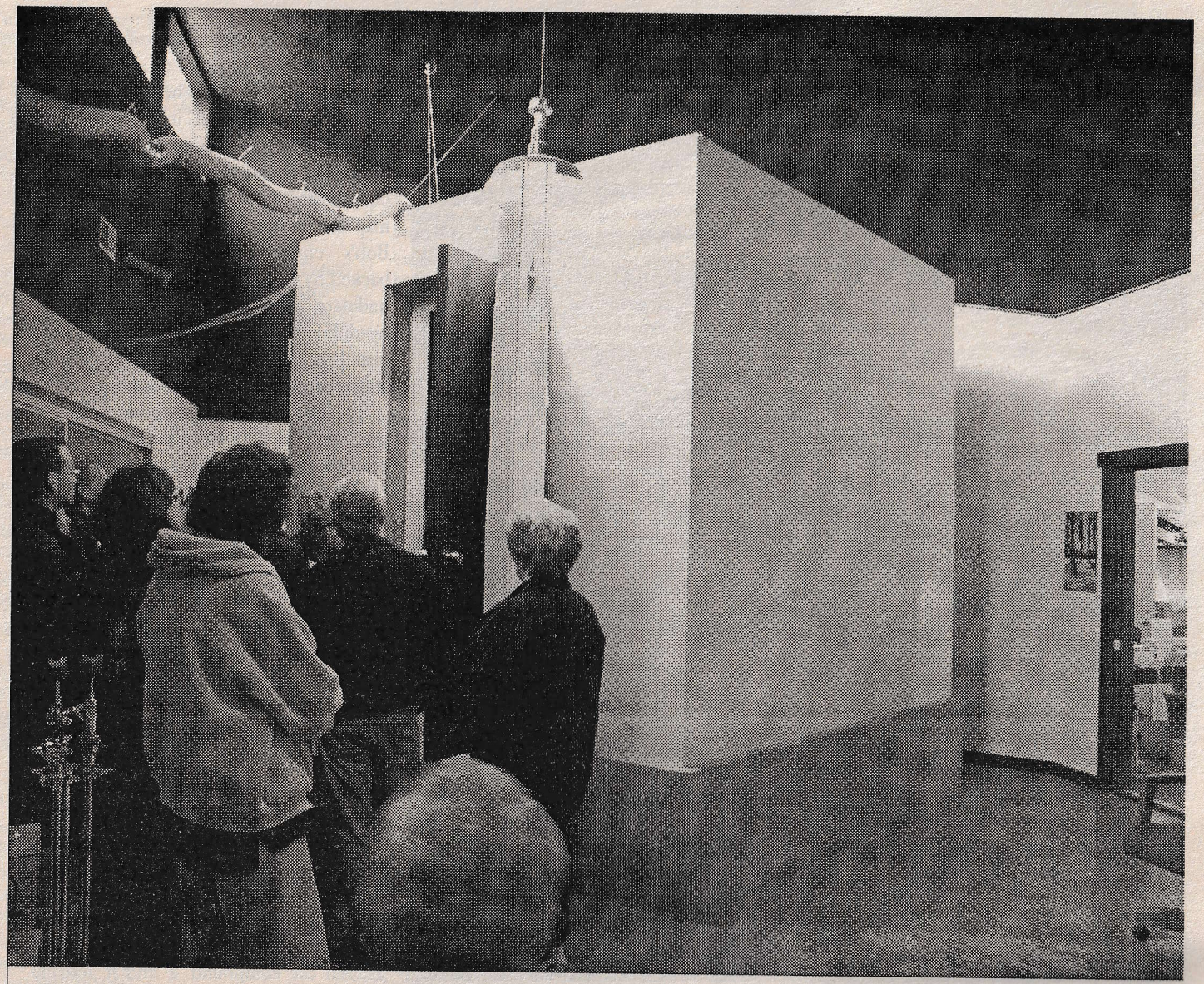
The trainers remind him that the dream could be about aspects of himself. By now, the group is aware that I'm a reporter, and I begin to wonder if the presence of a mole will bother them.

That night I joke with Jack about his dream, ribbing him for voting me "off the bardo," and urging him to "embrace his inner Stephen."

Nights are free at the Institute, and people mill around, reading and talking. When we do finally go to bed— which seems pretty early for me (though I have no idea; they took my watch, remember?), soft waves are pumped into our sleep chambers, one of the Institute's Hemi-Sync titles called "Super Sleeper." One has the option of turning the sounds off, but I find them soothing and sleep very well.

Mornings we are awakened at dawn by a Bob Monroe composition called "Cable Car," a goofy, slightly funky keyboard romp that constantly threatens to fall out of key or drop tempo. These recordings all have the Hemi-Sync on them, each tuned to do something different. "Super Sleeper" chills you out. "Cable Car" peps you up. Both are said to "refresh."

After showers (there seem to be more bathrooms in the Nancy Penn center than in the Pentagon) we head down to the basement for some yoga and Qi-Gong, then it's up to the dining room for breakfast. Food at the Institute is surprisingly non-vegetarian (plenty of meat), and I found it to be generally quite good.



The isolation booth.

300 paces lead to the center of the labyrinth.

After breakfast, we're off to do tape sessions. We come together as a group, discuss what we're about to hear, and then go to cocoon in our CHEC units.

The core of the Monroe Institute experience is a deep introduction to the various concentration levels of Bob Monroe's map of consciousness. The tapes feature Bob's cigarette-smooth radio voice, backed by Radio Shack static noises that undulate, glow, and swoosh through the headphones. Bob gently coaxes us to relax, visualize, and experience the various stages of guided consciousness.

By Bob's map, C1 consciousness is the waking, "normal" state. A regimen of exercises taught to us in the first days takes us to Focus 10, also called "mind awake, body asleep." From there we move to Focus 12, "expanded awareness." After that is Focus 15, a state considered "beyond time." And finally we move to Focus 21, or "The Bridge," purported to be a good place to people-watch in the vast beyond.

We spend each day exploring a new focus level, undergoing tape exercises and coming back together to "ground" and discuss what we have experienced. The object, as explained by our trainers, is to develop a natural recognition of the focus levels so that we can reach them without the tapes, which are thought of as "training wheels."

Later in the week, we're invited to move through the levels while on silent walks around the compound. I find it actually works quite well. I recognize the levels easily.

So, did I see God? Talk to my dead father? Commune with 4th-dimensional galaxy-travelers? Leave my body?

Well, yes and no. There is something significant being developed at the Institute. Whether it's just a brilliant guided meditation (complete with trance-inducing stereoscopic sound) or a doorway to a world of spirit entities, I cannot say. Others in my group reported experiences suggesting the latter. I admit I'm suspicious that a few might have said these things to get attention.

While everybody in our group was very nice, and several seemed rather righteous, some were what I would have to describe as "needy" personalities. Others were straight up damaged goods. At least two of them might benefit from better medications, while a couple more could use immediate professional psychological assistance.

One person had recently lost a spouse. Another appeared to have had breast cancer. (I didn't ask.) One was in a men's empowerment group. (What the—? Of course, he left the program with a new girlfriend, so who am I to judge? Power to the penis, brother.)

By day two I was frustrated, skeptical, and certain that I was surrounded by flakes. In fact, with a few exceptions, the only "normal" people with whom I could fully identify were the trainers, who seemed remarkably well-grounded for people whose day-to-day experiences include astral projection and disembodied spirits.

And then there was Jack, my roommate. On Monday morning, Jack woke up elated: "You were so right." He was talking about my "embrace your Inner Stephen" wisecracks. He insisted I read his notebook, and later at the group session he told his story, "My Inner Stephen," for all to hear.

He'd had another dream. This time, I was the main character. It began, "Stephen was an irresponsible pot head...."

Now that's odd. I never told him I'm a stoner. (I complied with the rules of the Institute and didn't use recreational drugs during the week I was there.)

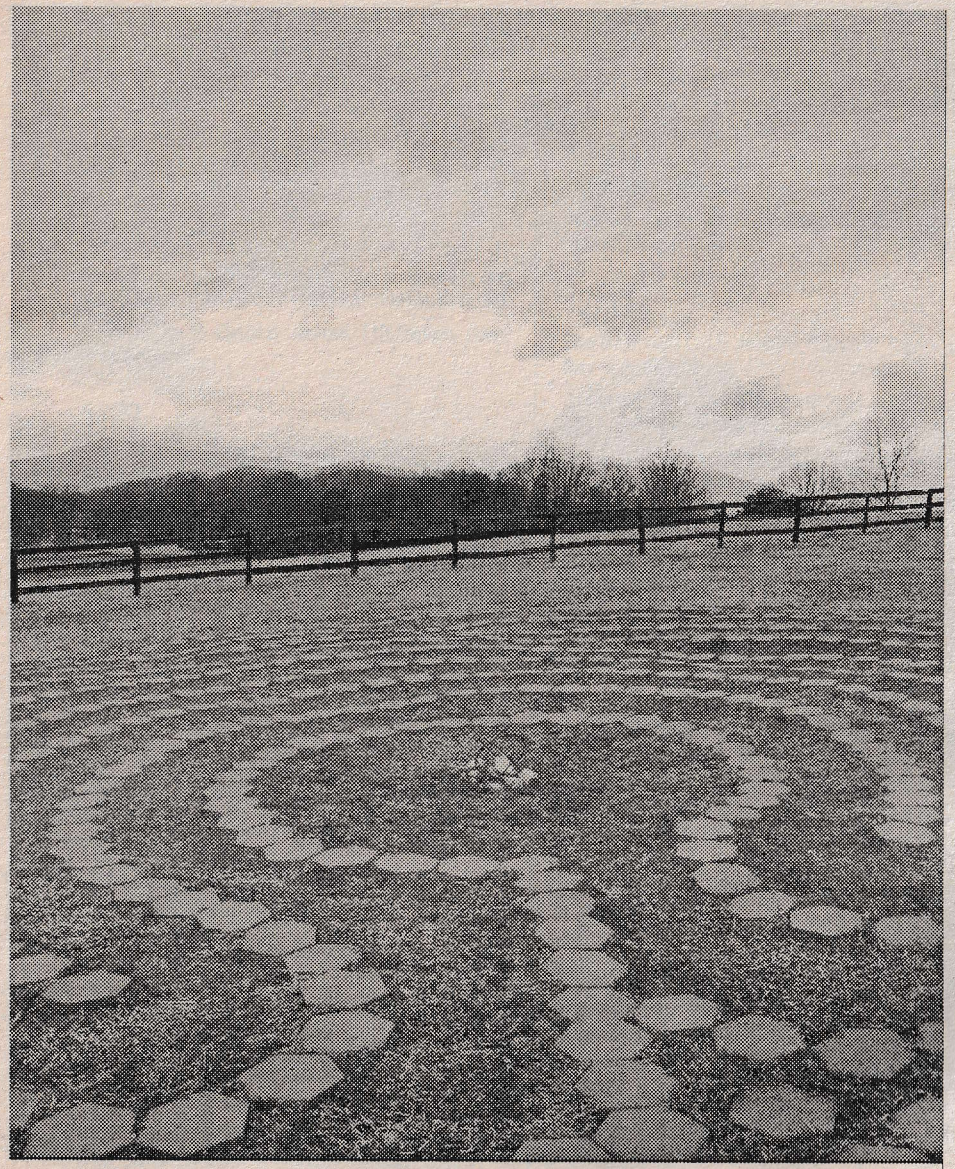
In his dream, I was driving a box truck (like a mail van), backing down a main road, and as Jack yelled at me to stop, I ran over a group of people, killing a small child. The dream undergoes a Kubrickian *2001: A Space Odyssey*-type transformation, and Jack realizes that it was he who killed the child— actually a representation of a son he'd pressured his wife to abort years earlier. Heavy stuff. Tears were shed. Big hugs all around. It seemed like a breakthrough moment.

During the next tape session, I heard a distant yell.

"Hello! Where are you?" I called back.

Were the "entities" suddenly talking to me? A chill prickled my skin as I realized that it was Jack, across the room in his CHEC unit, banging on the walls and yelling. At the end of the tape, I slowly poked my head out. Jack stood there, wagging his pinky down at me. "You're healed..."

One of the two giant rose quartz crystals imported from Brazil.



The labyrinth offers stellar views of Nelson County.

He tried to tell his story at the group session, but one of the crystal magic healers in our group cut him off. "I experienced stuff, too. Is it okay if somebody else tells their story now?"

That was it. He never fully came back. After sitting quietly through the rest of the group session, Jack began his descent, and by the next day he was in full-time channeling mode and had to be separated from the group.

To their credit, the trainers and staff at T.M.I. did their best to get his feet back on the ground as compassionately as possible. They were aware that he'd gone off the deep end in 1999 and been isolated. They didn't want to repeat that mistake. They checked with me to make sure he wasn't a safety problem— to see if I needed a different room— and took him off the tapes. He started meeting with the Institute psychologist.

It was strange for everyone. Jack was having a deep bipolar episode, and the guy from the newspaper was his roommate. He wasn't dangerous, but he was funneling a constant stream of bizarre, arrogant wisdom, about one-third of which seemed pretty right on in a transcendent sort of way.

At one point I had been thinking about a name for this article: "Cosmic Degrees." Poking at a guitar someone had offered him, he turned to me suddenly and asked, "Where's the degree?" Weird, huh? Finally, the Institute contacted his mom. It was clear he wasn't coming back to earth on his own.

It was a surreal lesson in the type of psychology that can weather the truly weird and come back unscathed. Surprisingly enough, the Institute claims it doesn't see this sort of problem very often. Staff psychologist Darlene Miller told me she's seen it only twice since the early '80s. That seems odd. You would think an Institute that deals directly with out of body experiences would attract plenty of weirdos, not all of them perfectly healthy.

But I enjoyed it. I'd love to go back for one of their deeper exploration programs. I'm not big on the touchy-feely, tear-your-heart-out-and-feast-on-it aspects of the drill, but that's me. Others in the group seemed to really respond to that. For many, I'm sure that's the bulk of what they paid to experience: a warm, loving group psychology raft— idealized for nurturing and affirmation.

But there does seem to be something "more" there as well. For me at least, the tapes made an attractive target for one-pointed meditation. For the most part, I found it very easy to stay focused on the sounds in my headphones and the sensations in my body, thus developing some sense of what Buddhists refer to as "calm abiding."

At one point, I did seem to sit up out of my body, though I found it hard to transfer my consciousness away from my physical self. All week there were stages where I seemed to be interacting with something, but I imagined it to be my own all-knowing subconscious.

Who can say? Maybe *I'm* a flake. ■